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SUBJECT: DMK COALITION SHRINKS, EXPECT EVEN CLOSER TIES TO CONGRESS

REF: CHENNAI 020

11. (SBU) Summary: On June 17 Tamil Nadu's ruling DMK party finally broke its contentious alliance with the PMK, another Tamil Nadu-based regional party. The allies had been feuding for more than a year, but it appears that the DMK preemptively broke ties when it heard that the PMK wanted to align with Tamil Nadu's principal opposition party in hopes of ultimately hitching its fortunes to the ascendant Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the upcoming national elections. The Union Minister for Health and Family Welfare Anbumani Ramadoss, a PMK member, will keep his position for the time being, but the DMK may ask that he be stripped of the ministry at a later date. The PMK/DMK split puts the DMK even more firmly on Congress's side, as it needs Congress to stay in power in Tamil Nadu. The defection of the PMK, which is a small but important electoral factor in Tamil Nadu, also hurts the ruling United Progressive Alliance's prospects in the upcoming national elections. End summary.

Long-running war of words finally comes to a head

12. (SBU) On June 17, the DMK announced that it was removing the PMK from Tamil Nadu's ruling Democratic Progressive Alliance (DPA). The immediate cause for the dismissal was an audio recording of a PMK official threatening the life of DMK officials, including the Union Minister for IT and Telecommunications A. Raja. But relations between the parties had been poor for over a year, with constant sniping by PMK founder Dr. Ramadoss (father of the Union Health Minister) about the DMK government's performance and its persistent objections to DMK's pet projects such as airport expansion and satellite city. Although the alliance held for four years, it has been an uneasy one ever since 2006 when DMK leader Karunanidhi became the Chief Minister with Ramadoss repeatedly expressing his desire that the PMK would lead a coalition government in Tamil Nadu in 2011.

Better to break-up than be broken-up with

13. (SBU) The DMK publicly explained the split as necessary to defend the party's honor against the onslaught of criticism from its coalition partner. Privately, however, DMK sources told post that Karunanidhi took the extreme step because he got wind of PMK plans to abandon the DMK. Our sources said that the PMK wants to latch onto the rising fortunes of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the next national election, and knows that the easiest way to do so is to join with the DMK's principal opposition, the AIADMK, which already has been making moves toward allying with the BJP (reftel). Karunanidhi decided it would be better to get rid of the PMK on his own terms, rather than let the PMK break with the DMK at a time closer to the elections, which would do more damage to his party. AIADMK leader J. Jayalalithaa did not immediately comment on the PMK's decision, but journalist contacts told us that she will eventually welcome the PMK into the fold after keeping them waiting so she can do so on her terms.

PMK Health Minister keeps his job (for now)

14. (SBU) The split between the parties raised questions about the future of Union Minister for Health and Family Welfare Anbumani Ramadoss, who is the son of the PMK's founder. Karunanidhi quickly quelled speculation that he would demand that the UPA remove Ramadoss as Health Minister. Karunanidhi's daughter Kanimozhi, a DMK Member of Parliament, confirmed to us that the DMK would not seek Ramadoss's removal but added that it would be very difficult for the DMK and PMK to co-exist as part of the UPA in the next election. Despite Karunanidhi and Kanimozhi's comments to the contrary, journalists told post that Karunanidhi is only waiting a little while before having Ramadoss sacked in order to avoid appearing vindictive.

Small party, potentially big impact

15. (SBU) The DMK's decision to boot the PMK has significant repercussions. The consensus view is that the 85 year-old Karunanidhi, who is serving his fifth term as Chief Minister, will do virtually anything in order to serve out his current term in office. Without the PMK's 18 legislative assembly seats, the DMK now depends on the Congress and its 34 legislators to hold onto power in Tamil Nadu. As a result, the PMK/DMK divorce will draw the DMK ever closer to Congress in New Delhi, ensuring that the Tamil Nadu party will be one of Congress's most reliable UPA partners.

16. (SBU) The split also has potential downstream electoral consequences. The PMK is a small caste-based party that has an outsized electoral significance due to the fact that the caste it

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represents (the Vanniars, a "most backward" but non-Dalit caste) is concentrated in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu. The large numbers of Vanniars in these districts means that the PMK can influence elections to about a third of Tamil Nadu's 39 seats in the India's Lok Sabha (lower house of Parliament) and for 70 of the 234 seats in Tamil Nadu's state legislative assembly. In 2004 the DPA partners -- the DMK, PMK, the Left parties, and the MDMK (which broke away after the 2004 elections taking its 4 seats) -- swept all 39 of Tamil Nadu's Lok Sabha seats and played a key role in allowing Congress to form the UPA government in New Delhi. Analysts credited the DPA's 2004 success to the excellent "alliance arithmetic" of which the PMK was an important part. The departure of the PMK, which has an uncanny ability to end up on the winning side in Tamil Nadu, could spell trouble for UPA efforts in the upcoming elections to hold onto its Lok Sabha seats from the southern state.

Captain to the rescue?

17. (SBU) Vijayakanth, a popular Tamil film star nicknamed "Captain," formed his own political party, the DMDK, in 2005 as an alternative to the dominant DMK and AIADMK parties. The DMDK has steadily increased its share of the vote. Many analysts believe that the DMDK now commands ten to fifteen percent of the statewide vote. There has been considerable media speculation that Karunanidhi and the DMK threw out the PMK to make room for Vijayakanth and the MDMK in the alliance. But Vijayakanth's brother-in-law (who is a DMDK official) told post the DMDK is not interested in joining hands with the DMK.

Comment: DMK's troubles in Tamil Nadu help BJP nationally

18. (SBU) Comment: The BJP is surely happy to see the DMK-led DPA coming apart as the 39 Lok Sabha seats that the coalition won in Tamil Nadu helped catapult the Congress-led UPA to power in New Delhi in 2004. The DPA's 2004 sweep was not unusual: in Tamil Nadu elections the winner tends to take most, if not all of the seats in play. With the DMK and its remaining Tamil Nadu allies (including Congress) in a defensive crouch with the elections looming, there is ample space for the BJP's potential allies, most notably the AIADMK and PMK, to pick up a significant number of seats. The wild card is

Vijayakanth's DMKD, which could shore up the Congress/DMK combine if they find a way to rope him in.

¶9. (SBU) Comment continued: In the short term, the PMK's ouster pushes the DMK closer to the Congress. On matters like the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Cooperation Initiative, we can expect that the DMK will toe the Congress line, if for no other reason to preserve itself in power in Tamil Nadu. End comment.

¶10. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy New Delhi.

HOPPER